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SUBJECT: SWEDISH AMBASSADOR TO DPRK DISCUSSES INTERNAL CONDITIONS IN APRIL 24 CALL ON THE AMBASSADOR

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b, d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In an April 24 call on the Ambassador, Swedish Ambassador to the DPRK Mats Foyer confirmed that last year's bumper harvest was not sufficient to overcome the food shortage in North Korea caused by systemic failures in central food distribution. Foyer saw, however, little sign of political unrest despite overall displeasure among the North Korean population from adverse living conditions. North Koreans' actual knowledge of the outside world was hard to ascertain, given the tight internal controls and restrictions on domestic travel for Koreans and foreigners alike. Foyer also reported that the DPRK had surprised EU mission diplomats in September, when MFA North American Affairs DG Li Gun personally briefed them on the fourth round of the Six Party Talks. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) On April 24, Swedish Ambassador to the DPRK Mats Foyer called on the Ambassador while visiting from Pyongyang for consultations in Seoul. Foyer was accompanied by Karl-Olof Andersson, Swedish MFA Deputy Director for Asia and the Pacific, and Sophie Olsson, First Secretary at the Swedish Embassy in Seoul.

FOOD SITUATION BAD DESPITE INCREASE IN HARVEST

¶3. (C) Foyer said the food situation was not good in North Korea despite last year's bumper harvest, largely due to failures in the DPRK's central distribution system. Despite government estimates of a 30 to 50 percent increase in harvest from the previous year, the World Food Program believed, based on information from multiple sources, that the crop yield for 2005 was only about 15 percent above 2004 figures. Few parts of the country received full daily rations, with most provinces receiving only about 500 grams of food for each citizen per day. Moreover, agents of the State Security Department reportedly stopped cracking down on black market trade in rice and other foodstuffs because ordinary North Korean people could not otherwise obtain enough food to survive. Foyer also reported that many North Koreans had sought second jobs outside normal working hours and scavenged the countryside for tree sprouts, edible grass,

and other items to supplement their diet.

INSTABILITY UNLIKELY DESPITE DISCONTENT

¶4. (C) Foyer noted that political movement to change the status quo was unlikely despite the clear discontent among ordinary citizens. He said there were no signs of major unrest or any other form of political threat to the Kim Jong-il regime. The DPRK appeared to have tightened social and political control in the past several months by keeping working-class civilians preoccupied with political studies, social activities, mass mobilization of labor for public works, and preparations for major public celebrations such as the 60th anniversary of the Korea Workers Party.

¶5. (C) Foyer believed efforts to tighten control suggested that the regime feared the possibility of changes to the status quo. Pyongyang's recent move to drive out foreign NGOs and international aid workers should be seen in this context. Foyer opined that the regime was not as concerned about external influence on civilians or low-level officials as it was about the effect on mid-ranking officials who engage well with foreigners. As a result of tightened internal controls, the Swedish Embassy and other EU missions in Pyongyang had not been able to conduct field visits for their various assistance projects outside Pyongyang since December. Foyer noted, however, that DPRK authorities had recently told EU chiefs of mission to "postpone" their proposed April visit to Hamhung instead of rejecting their travel request. Foyer said they now sought approval for a visit to Hamhung from May 11 to 12.

NORTH KOREANS' KNOWLEDGE OF OUTSIDE WORLD

¶6. (C) Foyer said it was difficult to ascertain the extent to which ordinary North Korean people knew about the outside world. Noting that public propaganda had presented the ROK as having worse conditions than the DPRK during the famine in the 1990s, Foyer hypothesized that North Koreans could attempt to initiate change in their own society if they realized the world beyond North Korea was not as portrayed by the regime's propaganda. He cautioned, however, that restrictions on domestic travel had stymied the spread of media that offered a window to the outside world, such as bootlegged videos of South Korean television shows and tales of visits across the border into China. At the Swedish Embassy, however, the situation was quite different, as local staff had access to uncensored internet and foreign news outlets, such as BBC World, Foyer added.

DPRK MFA SURPRISINGLY INFORMATIVE ON OCCASION

¶7. (C) Foyer said the Swedish Embassy currently sought to get a briefing on the April 11 session of the Supreme People's Assembly. While he did not expect a detailed or candid read-out, Foyer pointed out that the North Koreans could, on occasion, reveal more information than expected. As an example, he recalled that MFA North American Affairs DG Li Gun, the deputy head of delegation to the Six Party Talks, had provided resident foreign diplomats a briefing on the September 19 Joint Statement shortly after the conclusion of the fourth round of the Six Party Talks. The briefing was unusual because: (1) the DG for European Affairs would normally provide the briefing; and (2) Li, having personally participated in the Talks, could not prevent himself from stating "a bit more" than his talking points might have allowed.

QUESTIONS TO AMBASSADOR ON 6PT, U.S-ROK RELATIONS, JAPAN

¶8. (C) Deputy Director Karl-Olof Andersson asked the Ambassador about the status of the Six Party process, as well as his views on Washington's relationship with the ROK and

Japan. The Ambassador said the DPRK continued to condition its return to the Six Party Talks on unfreezing DPRK accounts at Banco Delta Asia (BDA). U.S. law enforcement measures were not, however, subject to negotiation. Nevertheless, the Ambassador stressed, the Six Party Talks remained the most sensible way to resolve the DPRK nuclear issue and the United States was ready to return at any time.

¶9. (C) On U.S.-ROK relations, the Ambassador stated that the bilateral relationship was in good shape, although some difficult issues remained. The difference in the two governments' viewpoints on certain policy issues -- such as the North Korea problem -- was, however, often exaggerated in the Korean press. On ROK-Japan relations, the Ambassador stressed that the relationship between Seoul and Tokyo appeared stable despite occasional political skirmishes on territorial and historical issues.

¶10. (C) The Ambassador expressed appreciation for the Swedish Embassy's assistance in Pyongyang in assisting American citizens and representing U.S. interests.

VERSHBOW